

From Protection to Participation: A Systematic Literature Review of the Shift in Media Literacy Theory from Classical to Digital Eras

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Abstract

This SLR (systematic literature review) integrates peer-reviewed theoretical and empirical research and characterizes the transition in theory of media literacy from the classical media age (1960s-1990s) to today's digital period (2000-2025). In accordance with the PRISMA framework, a systematic search was conducted on four different scholarly outlets (ERIC, Communication & Mass Media Complete, Scopus, and Google Scholar) between the years 1970-2025. Initially, of 1247 records, 42 theoretical and longitudinal publications satisfied inclusion criteria. Thematic synthesis was employed to grasp key theoretical dimensions. The review isolates five main axes of theoretical shift: (1) inoculation and protection to empowering and participatory stance; (2) linear critique of message to modules of algorithmic and platform cognizance; (3) individual level of cognition to socio-cultural, situated literacies; (4) static text to fluid, user generated and multimodal content; (5) key skills in relation to competence in networked media to critical digital citizenship. There exists a dearth of literature probing into classical-to-digital theoretical shift in media literacy as a coherent paradigmatic transition, which this SLR attempts to study explicitly. The paper concludes with an integrated model bridging legacy and emerging frameworks.

Keywords: Media Literacy Theory, Digital Media Literacy, Systematic Literature Review, Protectionist Paradigm, Participatory Culture, Algorithmic Literacy.

1. Introduction

Media literacy has been defined as “a set of perspectives that we actively use to expose ourselves to the mass media and interpret the meaning of the messages we encounter” (Potter, 2010, p. 19). However the “mass media” of Potter’s definition has experienced an enormous mutation. The golden days of media literacy theory—from the ‘60s to the ‘90s—were dominated by the insurgence of power in the hands of a few of the broadcast media, cinema, and print. The key metaphors were inoculation (freeing individuals from the harmful effects of what they watched or read) and critical autonomy (becoming a participant rather than consumer of messages). Contrary to this, contemporary media environment has become much more digital, platform-centric, participatory, extraction-based, and systematically warped by the focus on networks. This shift has not only broadened the field of media literacy; it has actually challenged the very theoretical foundations of media literacy. Classical theory presupposed a fairly immutable relationship between the producer (media institutions) and the receiver (audience), but with the advent of digital media, contemporary researchers argued that that relationship is in fact quite dynamic in nature. Where classical theory was concerned with a critical analysis of the production of representation, digital theory has to grapple with filter bubbles, deepfakes, algorithmic bias, and affective polarization. Despite the increasing and widely acknowledged awareness of a theoretical shift, to date there have been no comprehensive systematic review of the literature which explicitly maps that historic move from traditional to digital. This review aims to explore this area.

1.1 Research Questions

The review is guided by three research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: What are the key theoretical characteristics of classical media literacy theory (1970–1995)?
- RQ2: What are the primary theoretical features of new digital media literacy theory (2005–2025)?

- RQ3: What are the major axes along which the transition occurred, and what are the continuity and discontinuity of these features?

2. Methodology

2.1 Systematic Literature Review Design

The PRISMA 2020 statement for systematic review reporting (Page et al., 2021) has been followed in this study. For this research, SLR is the most appropriate strategy, as the research questions attempt to trace the conceptual and theoretical shifts over a broad time period, requiring a reproducible synthesis of heterogeneous theoretical literature.

2.2 Search Strategy

A systematic search was conducted in April 2025 across the following databases: ERIC (education), Communication & Mass Media Complete (communication), Scopus (multidisciplinary), and Google Scholar (broad coverage). The search string combined terms related to media literacy, theoretical frameworks, and periodization:

("media literacy" OR "media education" OR "digital literacy" OR "information literacy") AND (theory OR paradigm OR framework OR conceptual model) AND ("classical" OR "traditional" OR "legacy" OR "protectionist" OR "1970s" OR "1980s") AND ("digital" OR "participatory" OR "algorithmic" OR "platform" OR "21st century")

Additionally, backward citation searching (snowballing) was performed on seminal works (Buckingham, 2003; Hobbs, 2010; Livingstone, 2004; Potter, 2004).

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles or book chapters (theoretical or empirical with explicit theoretical contribution)
- Published between 1970 and 2025
- Explicitly addresses media literacy as a theoretical construct

- Focuses on conceptual frameworks (not merely pedagogical interventions)
- English language

2.3.1. Exclusion criteria:

- Conference abstracts or dissertations (to ensure peer review consistency)
- Studies focused purely on digital skills without theoretical framing
- Purely empirical studies without theoretical discussion
- Opinion pieces or editorials

2.4 Screening and Selection Process

The search identified 1247 citations in the first instance. After duplicate removal ($n = 312$), 935 titles and abstracts were screened. 791 were excluded on the basis of irrelevance (e.g. Health literacy related, exclusively technology education related etc.). 144 abstracts were identified for inclusion. 102 were excluded after full articles were obtained as 38 articles lacked explicit theoretical framing, 31 articles focused only on intervention design devoid of theory, 22 were not in English and 11 were dissertations. Final list of included studies: $N=42$.

2.5 Data Extraction and Thematic Synthesis

The data was extracted in a standardised format: author/year, theoretical tradition (classical/digital/bridging), key concepts and reference to the previous theory. An inductive thematic synthesis was conducted following the method proposed by Thomas & Harden (2008):

- stage 1, line-by-line coding of theoretical data
- stage 2, creation of a descriptive theme
- stage 3, creation of analytical themes mapping the transition.

3. Finding and Analysis

The findings have been structured according to the research question. RQ1 and RQ2 are summarized following the thematic syntheses of classical and digital theories. RQ3 is summarized following the five axes of shift in the theory.

3.1 RQ1: Defining Characteristics of Classical Media Literacy Theory (1970–1995)

Classical media literacy theory emerged from three intersecting traditions: (a) the British cultural studies tradition (Hall, 1980; Williams, 1974), (b) Canadian/Marshall McLuhan's media ecology (McLuhan, 1964), and (c) North American media effects research (Bandura, 1977; Gerbner et al., 1986). Synthesis of included studies reveals four core characteristics.

3.1.1 The Protectionist Framework

Hobbs (1998) named the dominant classical framework as the “protectionist” framework. In this framework, the mass media are seen as dominant tools for persuasion in terms of ideology and commerce. On the contrary, audiences, especially children and young people, are seen as being susceptible to the influences of the media. The media literacy here entails inoculating learners against perceived negative influences including violence, stereotyping, materialism etc. As Masterman (1985) has argued, “the primary aim of media education is to produce critical autonomy” (Masterman, 1985, p. 24). Notably, the early programs, such as The Ontario Film Studies curriculum of the 1970s, explicitly positioned the media as a “second curriculum” that children must be wary of.

3.1.2 Linear Transmission and Encoding/Decoding

The classical theory adopted the Shannon-Weaver linear model of communication (source → message → receiver), but was further developed by Hall (1980) in his encoding/decoding model. Here, he argued that media texts are encoded with preferred readings but that readings can be dominant, negotiated or oppositional. However, this acknowledged that the ‘interpretive agency’ still prioritises the text as the stable

unit of analysis. Media literacy, within this construct, was seen as a matter of ‘close reading’ of media texts, with the help of analysing camera work, lighting, narrative structure, ideological subtexts etc (Buckingham, 1990).

3.1.3 Emphasis on Cognitive and Critical Skills

The most prevalent concept of media literacy in the North American tradition has been the cognitive theory of media literacy proposed by Potter (2004). He described media literacy as “a set of perspectives that we actively use... to interpret meaning”. These perspectives consisted of cognitive structures (knowledge structures about media) and information-processing tasks (analysis, evaluation, synthesis). Consistent with others at the time, the Aspen Institute’s 1992 National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy derived a definition that includes “the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms” (Aufderheide, 1993, p. 1). Analysis and evaluation were given the most emphasis with production (communicate) often being ranked a distant fourth.

3.1.4 Mass Media Institutions as Gatekeepers

Lastly, classical theory assumed that there was gatekeeping institutionally (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; DeJuliis, 2015, p. 99). Newspapers were run by editors; television was controlled by producers; movies were made by studios. The ‘mass’ in mass media signified one-to-many communication with relatively few transmitters and numerous receivers. Literacy meant understanding how ownership, advertising, and professional routines influenced content (a political economy tradition; cf. Mosco, 1996).

3.2 RQ2: Defining Characteristics of Contemporary Digital Media Literacy Theory (2005–2025)

The digital era (sped up after 2005 with the advent of Web 2.0, social media sites, algorithmic feeding) has led to a fragmented, yet identifiable, new theoretical space.

3.2.1 The Participatory and Empowerment Paradigm

Most evident shift is from the assumption of protection to participation. Jenkins et al. (2009) proposed “participatory culture” as a normative model of the ideal media world: one characterised by relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic participation, strong support for creating and sharing ones creations, and some informal mentorship whereby each participant helps others learn.” Media literacy is consequently, less of a protection game and more of an agency game. Jenkins (2006) contended that the “new literacies” are social skills built through collaboration, sharing and networking.

Livingstone (2004) reflected this dichotomy most directly: ‘the protectionist paradigm is being challenged by the empowerment paradigm’ (p. 75). Digital literacy theory does not call to protect youth from media, but rather, to teach them to be active users-of navigating, creating, and advocating.

3.2.2 Algorithmic and Platform Literacy

There was no place for algorithms in the classical theory. However, the contemporary theories are primarily concerned with the visibility of code: as Gillespie (2014) contended, platforms are not neutral shuttles but “calculated publics”. Bucher (2017) coined “algorithmic imagination” to explain that users’ perceptions of algorithmically determined rankings are always partly wrong. This has led to specialized sub-literacies: recommendation literacy (grasping Google’s recommendations), search literacy (questioning the order of Google search results), and filter bubble awareness (Pariser, 2011). There is now a growing corpus framing algorithmic systems as semiotic-technical hybrids that demand novel forms of critique (Cotter, 2023; Siles et al., 2024).

3.2.3 Sociocultural and Situated Literacies

Classical theorists have focused on individual cognition (Potter, 2004) or textual decoding (Hall, 1980). Theorists working within a digital paradigm increasingly rely on New Literacy Studies (Street, 1984; Gee, 2010), which conceptualizes literacy as social practices rather than as a neutral skill,

something one has rather than something one does in context. Livingstone & Sefton-Green (2016) found that young people's media practices are highly context-dependent, reflecting social divisions (class and gender), and institutions. Likewise, Boyd (2014) argued that "digital natives" are not a uniform group of cyber-pioneers. Instead, "digital natives" practice their digital skills in networks that are often misunderstood by adults and located in social dramas.

3.2.4 Multimodality and Co-creation

Digital texts are rarely mono-modal (only text-based). Kress (2010) argued, multimodality—image, sound, gesture, layout—is not a new thing but has just been made newly visible and creatable. Accordingly, contemporary media literacy theory includes semiotic design: the ways in which meaning is constructed across modalities. Additionally, distinctions between producers and consumers have become blurred into prosumer (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010) or produser (Bruns, 2008). Literacy now encompasses remix skills, curation skills, and platform-specific vernacular creativity (e.g., TikTok edits and formats).

3.2.5 Critical Digital Citizenship

Finally, the normative horizon has shifted from individual critical agency towards collective civic action. For instance, Mihailidis (2018) advocates for civic media literacy--the ability to interact with media not merely as a consumer but as an agent of change. Civic media literacy entails recognizing how affordances of a platform help or hinder collective civic action, grasping the nuances of how false information is spread across platforms, and how to develop the competency to join counterpublics (Middaugh, 2019, p. 18; Moncada et al., 2025). This broadens to the emerging movements around "data literacy" (Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2020) and "adversarial media literacy" (Kozyreva et al., 2023) as tools for fighting disinformation.

3.3 RQ3: Five Axes of Theoretical Transition

Synthesis across the 42 included studies reveals five principal axes along which media literacy theory has shifted. Table 1 summarizes these axes.

Table 1: Five Axes of Theoretical Transition in Media Literacy

Dimension	Classical Era (1970–1995)	Digital Era (2005–2025)
Primary metaphor	Protection / Inoculation	Participation / Empowerment
Communication model	Linear (source-message-receiver)	Networked / Platform (multidirectional, algorithmic)
Unit of analysis	Stable text (television program, newspaper article)	Fluid assemblage (feed, thread, algorithmic flow)
Locus of literacy	Individual cognition and critical skills	Situated social practices + multimodal design
Normative goal	Critical autonomy (resist manipulation)	Digital citizenship (co-create, advocate, contest)

Axis 1: Metaphor. Of the axes, the transition from a health-infused discourse of vulnerability/inoculation to a civic-infused one of agency/participation is the most substantively documented, but see also some scholars (Hobbs, 2010) who propose synthesis rather than replacement: protection from disinformation still applies.

Axis 2: Communication model. The linear model of classical theory cannot capture the temporally recursive aspects of social media practices (users comment, reply, remix, and reshare in real time). Newer models (boyd, 2014; Van Dijck, 2013) define a “networked publics” where platform architecture, practices, and algorithmically generated meaning coalesce.

Axis 3: Unit of analysis. Engaging in classical close reading of one episode of *Dallas* or *The Cosby Show* (Ang, 1985) will not work on a platform like TikTok where the unit of consumption is the unique personalized, algorithmically-generated “For You” page. A major rupture has been identified by 18 of the 42 studies, which is the invisibility of infrastructure-digital literacy is no longer only about the object itself, but also about the logic of data collection and ranking (Christin, 2020).

Axis 4: Locus of literacy. Classical theory found literacy in the head (cognitive structures). Digital theory (or more specifically, New Literacy Studies) found literacy in situated action. This was not an incremental shift but an ontological difference in assumptions of what literacy is (Street, 2003).

Axis 5: Normative goal. Traditional media literacy sought to create the autonomous, critical citizen who was skeptical of the message. Digital theory is currently trying to bring about the connected, participatory citizen who can shape media ecologies. Some recent work (Zucker & McGrew, 2023) indicates the two might be complementary: understanding the source is a prerequisite of effective participation.

Points of continuity: None of the core arguments changed. Out of the 42 studies presented, what remains is that media are constructed and constructing. As Hobbs (2010) concludes, “All media messages are constructed” (p. 18) is one of the first principle from classical to digital. Further, the call for pedagogical intervention by educators-though its form is contested-remains an argument of consistence.

4. Further Discussions

4.1 Integration: Toward an Inclusive Model

Some of each. While tempting, a simple binary “old vs. New” division cannot be sustained. For one thing, the end of protectionist fears is a fiction: disinformation, online harassment and data extraction are real and require defensive skills. For another, some classical skills (e.g., deciphering authorial intention, detecting emotive language) are not obsolete.

This research aims to propose an Integrated Multi-Layered Model derived from the synthesis. This model comprises three layers:

- Foundational layer (classical): Access, analysis, evaluation of constructed messages.
- Procedural layer (bridging): Production, sharing, collaboration skills.

- Critical-digital layer (emerging): Algorithmic awareness, platform critique, data literacy, civic participation.

This model in itself avoids the “either protection or participation” fallacy; because in today’s world, for media literacy to be healthy, there needs to be both.

4.2 Implications for Research and Practice

As for the researchers, three gaps in the synthesis surfaced: (a) limited longitudinal research exploring trajectories of digital literacy practices; (b) almost no comparative research of Global South contexts with contrasting access patterns; (c) minimal theoretical work connecting artificial intelligence (beyond algorithms) to literacy theories.

For educators, the implication is clear: curriculum should not be confined to deconstructing advertisements and news feeds. It should include enabling students to “reverse engineer” the recommender systems, trace data through networks, and learn to engage ethically with platform publics.

4.3 Limitations

This review opens up further scopes for research. The search was limited to English publications, thereby excluding significant Latin American (Freirean) and European (semiotic) inputs. Moreover, the heavy emphasis on theoretical rather than empirical studies means that the implementation of these theories (what actually happens in classrooms) remains under-examined.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review of literature has shown the progression of media literacy theory away from a classical (protectionist, linear, text-based, cognitive, autonomous) model, to the emergent digital (participatory, networked, algorithmic, local, citizenship-focused) model. Despite considerable rupture between the models (especially regarding not just the need for but the significance of the development of algorithm and platform literacy), there is still continuity with classical

models of critical analysis that remains a strong theoretical foundation. The strongest position is one which does not reject classical models completely, nor take a naive celebratory or apolitical approach to participatory culture—rather the one which accounts for multiple functions and levels of critical media competence.

As media platforms continue to change— with generative AI and immersive worlds on the horizon, media literacy theory must be both reflexive and adaptive. This change is probably not the last.

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